



RANTS & RAVES

Mel Croucher concocts a scheme to help the world's poor and simultaneously kill off the record industry, while **Simon Edwards** questions the media's hypocrisy in blaming computer games and pop music for violent behaviour

OUT OF AFRICA

Mel Croucher **RAVES**

How can we use music downloads to educate the world's needy? About four years ago, when I was even stroprier than I am today, my company set up an internet project designed to destroy the stranglehold of record labels over their recording artists and bankrupt the bastards. We were in negotiation with the top artists on the planet, but you know how it is with superstars: they dropped dead, went mad or tried to sue me – or I tried to sue them.

Anyway, by the time I'd signed up my first few artists, the world was downloading free music like there was no tomorrow, so I canned the project. This summer's Live8 shamed me into opening the can again, but I had designed it for the benefit of the western consumers, when I should have been concentrating on Africa all the time.

The race is on for the first nation on Earth to become a completely wireless society, giving every citizen access to WiFi computing and communications from anywhere within the nation's borders. If you think you can guess which country that will be, think again. It won't be a

Scandinavian utopia or an Asian Tiger, and it certainly won't be the UK.

My bet is on Mauritius, a laid-back parliamentary democracy off the East coast of Africa. By the end of this year, their government-supported technology and training schemes will benefit almost the entire population across a network that covers 90 per cent of the land-mass, radiating from Cybercity, the futuristic hub not far from the capital, Port Louis. They hope to achieve their goal by the anniversary of the Boxing Day tsunami that wreaked havoc along the coasts of the island, but money is tight and tourism is understandably wobbly. So there's a need for a direct

method to help Mauritius achieve its goal, and then help that nation roll out the project to the rest of Africa.

MUSICAL SHARES

My plan is simple, and it goes like this. The internet domain suffix for Mauritius is .mu, which is used internationally for music domain registrations. Current .mu registrations are ludicrously expensive and prone to scams and rip-offs, so I want them put in the hands of an independent non-profit-making charity. Then I want every musician, from the world-famous superstar to the unknown wannabe, to register their .mu domain for \$50 (around £27) a year, with all benefits going directly to the online education of the people of Mauritius.

Got it so far? Good. Next I want the world's musical artists to put their work online and sell downloads direct through their .mu website. Fans will pay the going rate direct to the artists. The record labels will be cut out, and what used to be their slice of revenue will be used to extend the online educational network across Africa.

The project is a virtual, permanent, international festival of music in which all musicians, from



the greatest to the lowliest anywhere on the planet, have an equal chance of making it. I'll need someone to act as figurehead of this philanthropic internet utopia and make sure nobody gets ripped off, and I need someone whose credentials are impeccable and who has the initials MU. Aha! I hereby nominate Midge Ure.

GUNS DON'T KILL PEOPLE, GAMES DO

Simon Edwards

RANTS

Two years ago a young man was arrested in Fayette, Alabama, on suspicion of stealing a car. At the police station, as he was being processed, he snatched the Glock automatic pistol from one of the police officers and shot the guy in the head, killing him. He ran to the car park, killing two more officers and stole a set of keys to a police car, which he used to escape.

In August this year he was sentenced to death. The reason for his brutal behaviour was, according to the defence lawyers, that he had been playing a violent computer game.

After he was arrested for the murders, 18-year-old Devin Moore reportedly said that "life is like a video game. Everybody's got to die sometime." The connection between virtual and real violence became a theme of his trial. Hysterical media reports gladly warmed to the idea that computer games can make a sane person go postal, in much the same way that journalists have always been glad to link heavy metal music or role-playing games with children becoming involved in Satanism and murder. Parents of victims and perpetrators alike are also pleased to accuse musicians, games developers and more or less anyone except themselves.

DEATH METAL

Brummie rock band Judas Priest was accused of inciting the suicide of two Nevada boys in 1990. The parents sued the band, alleging that the album the boys had been listening to for five hours straight, while under the influence of alcohol and marijuana, had subliminally prompted them to nip down to the local playground, make a suicide pact and blow their heads off with a sawn-off shotgun. Let's not question their access to illegal drugs and weapons, though. The music made them do it.

The Columbine school massacre is another case in point. The two lads who committed this atrocity in 1999, and who killed themselves afterwards, wore black coats and were apparently interested in the music of Marilyn Manson, a rock star whose work portrays a rather bleak outlook on life to those without a sense of irony. Both boys were fans of violent computer games such as Doom. Oh, and they were also bullied at school, but let's not worry about that now. It was probably the clothes, music and games that drove them mad.

Devin Moore was certainly interested in playing a computer game called Grand Theft Auto: Vice City. And who can blame him? It is a great game that *Computer Shopper* staff, including myself, played for hours when it was released for the PC. But Devin played it a little too much, for hours at a time.

When someone becomes obsessed with doing a single task repeatedly for hours and hours, it's generally a sign that something is wrong in their lives. Could it be that playing games or listening to music is the symptom rather than the cause?

Granted, listening to depressing tunes or acting out violent fantasies virtually is unlikely to be ideal therapy, but if you noticed someone in your family staring into space, their CD player continuously playing a single

track from any album, be it one by Marilyn Manson or Lighthouse Family, you'd know something was up.

In Moore's case there was also the small matter of having suffered abuse from an early age. That fact tends to lie buried in the news stories bearing headlines such as 'Can a video game lead to murder?' (*CBS News*) and 'Did a video game turn a man into a killer?' (*Celebrity Justice*). The *Guardian's* coverage mentioned the history of abuse in the murderer's background early in the story, but the headline still read 'Video game player guilty in Ala. Slaying'.

The defence tried to use computer games as an excuse, but identifying the accused as a game player still seems a bit irrelevant. How about 'Toilet User Guilty of Murder', or 'Public Transport Customer Goes On Rampage'? Regular London Transport users should be surprised that the latter headline isn't more common.

ALL PLAYED OUT

A couple of days before Moore was sentenced to death, a South Korean man died at the controls of a

When someone becomes obsessed with doing a single task repeatedly for hours and hours, it's generally a sign that something is wrong in their lives

games PC. Mr Lee had been playing StarCraft, a fiendishly addictive real-time strategy game, for 50 hours almost without a break. He wasn't locked up in the privacy of his own home, though. He sat in a cyber café and played himself to death in front of customers and staff, eventually succumbing to "heart failure stemming from exhaustion", according to a provincial police officer.

We can only guess at details of his family and work life. Or a society that allows someone to run themselves down in public like that. We don't know the details of Devin Moore's background, and neither can we fully understand Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold's motives when they went on a killing spree through Columbine High School. But we can guess that they weren't entirely balanced before they started playing computer games and that nobody noticed or cared enough about their behaviour until it was too late.

If you are on the edge, ready to go on a killing spree, it wouldn't be surprising if your taste in music and other pastimes was a bit dark and escapist. Cue the playing of heavy metal music, Dungeons & Dragons

and violent PC games. If anyone is escaping reality here, it's the people who rush to blame these potential warning signs, rather than concerning themselves with school bullies, sexual abuse and the other core reasons why a teenager might want to grab and use strangely accessible weapons.

HIDDEN DEPTHS

As an interesting side note, the latest version of the Grand Theft Auto series, San Andreas, recently hit the headlines thanks to the discovery of some well-hidden sex scenes. Despite what you might have read elsewhere, small children will not accidentally stumble across polygonal figures making out. To view these scenes, you need to get hold of a bit of software that is not generally available and install it to unlock this part of the game. In other words, you have to know what you are doing.

Even then, all you'll get is a mini game that allows your onscreen character to make love to a few of his equally pixelated girlfriends. This has so offended the authorities in

America that all hell has broken loose and even Hillary Clinton has become involved, trying to increase the game's age rating from Mature (up to the age of 17) to Adult Only (18 and above). In the UK, the game already has an 18 rating.

Before this discovery, everyone was happy to allow 17-year-olds to assume the identity of a gangster who can procure and pay prostitutes, only to murder them later and steal the money back. This feature has been part of the last two Grand Theft Auto games. Want to assault innocent passers-by and policemen and perform random drive-by shootings? No problem. But develop a relationship with another character, take her on dates and end up back at her place for a coffee and an intimate work-out? That's obscene. **CS**

CONTACT

MEL CROUCHER

mel@computersshopper.co.uk

SIMON EDWARDS

simon@computersshopper.co.uk